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Contemporary European History

DOI:

[10.1017/S0960777318000735](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777318000735)

Published: 08/02/2019

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Papadogiannis, N. (2019). Brexit from Greek Vantage Points: Changing Histories in the United Kingdom and Greece. *Contemporary European History*, 28(1), 27-30.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777318000735>

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Brexit from Greek vantage points: debating politics and culture in the UK and Greece

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The ramifications of the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum and its outcome were not confined to the country, where it was held. Greece, a country with manifold connections to the UK, as my text will show, has also witnessed rancorous debates around it. My contribution will argue that Brexit has served as a canvas onto which various social and political groups in Greece have projected and partially reconstructed their perceptions of the UK. Thus, I will first analyse those representations of the UK in Greece and I will subsequently address the ways in which Brexit has affected them. The final part of my analysis will demonstrate that Brexit has also functioned in Greece as a mirror for self-reflection on the tools that democracies should use in the EU in general and in Greece in particular. This self-reflection has orbited around the potential similarities between the UK EU membership referendum and Greek bailout referendum in 2015.

Greek perceptions of the UK are linked to a long story of British involvement in Greece. The UK had intervened in Greek political affairs already since the inception of Greece. During the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832), Britain began to support the creation of an independent Greek state. It subsequently meddled with Greek politics quite actively until the late 1940s. For instance, during World War I and in the Interwar years, it supported the Liberal political camp, led by Eleftherios Venizelos. The final stages of World War II and its aftermath were no exception to this attitude of British intervention in Greece. British troops fought alongside Greek anti-Communist forces against the military arm of the left-wing National Liberation Front in Athens in December 1944, roundly defeating the left-wing forces. From 1947 on and especially in the context of the Truman Doctrine, the UK became less involved in Greek domestic affairs, being substituted by the USA. Nevertheless, Cyprus had been administered by Britain since 1878 and became a British crown colony in 1925. During the 1950s, a proportion of Greek Cypriots launched a campaign in favour of the unification of the island with Greece. This was matched with armed resistance against the British authorities.

Those developments clearly left their imprint on how different political subjects in Greece viewed the UK as a political actor, approached, of course, filtered through the rhetoric that each of those subjects employed. The Communist Left, but also moderate left-wingers, had been critical of British imperialism already during the Interwar years. Their political anti-British sentiment perpetuated in the post-World War II era, but was combined with a political anti-Americanism they developed particularly from the late 1940s on. Nevertheless, the right-wing and centrist forces also became growingly skeptical towards British policymakers against the backdrop of tensions in Cyprus in the 1950s. Greek right-wing and centrist political subjects

faced a vexatious dilemma: on the one hand, they approached the UK as a key ally of Greece in the Western political and military institutions. On the other, it was difficult for them to claim simultaneously to be the sole genuine patriots as opposed to the Communists, while appearing to be linked closely to British authorities in Cyprus that tried to prevent the incorporation of the island into Greece. Right-wing and centrist policymakers were careful, however, and aimed to sustain amicable diplomatic relations between Greece and the UK.

In the subsequent decades, the Cypriot issue did not lead to a rift between the two countries. Crucially, the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 marked a caesura for anti-Americanism rather than for anti-British sentiment in Greece: the former spread across the political spectrum, a condition that persevered in the subsequent decades. Meanwhile, critiques of the UK, which were voiced in Greece in relation to developments in Cyprus in 1974, were not so scathing, as they had been in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the memory of what is often labelled as British aggression in Cyprus prior to the creation of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 is still present in Greece: crucially, some main streets in Greek cities are named after people killed by the British authorities in Cyprus in the 1950s.

Greek subjects have also voiced concerns over the British foreign policy in general and not only in relation to Greece and Cyprus. Quite tellingly, the first stage of the Iraq War in 2003 was an occasion, when Greece witnessed massive protests against the intervention particularly of the USA, but also of the UK, in Iraq. The protests were organised by diverse left-wing subjects, but attracted people from diverse ideological persuasions. Such anti-British outbreaks have not crystallised into a persistent anti-British sentiment either at the government or at the grassroots level. Greek governments of all ideological persuasions, including the Left, have collaborated with the British government up to the present day. Similarly, the anti-imperialist (and explicitly anti-British) language, in which the terrorist group “Revolutionary Organisation 17 November” (17N) couched its assassination of the British defence attaché Stephen Saunders in Athens in 2000, failed to touch a chord in Greek society. As John Brady Kiesling claims in his monograph *Greek Urban Warriors*, the Greek public did not sympathise with 17N, but, rather, it turned against them.

Politics in the narrow sense is not, however, the only lens through which the UK has been viewed in Greece. This element has featured in parallel with an ambivalent approach in Greece towards social and cultural conditions in the UK. Such a tendency has existed in Greece at least since the 1960s and contains some clearly pro-British perceptions: crucially, that the UK is a global hub for innovation. The UK, in this vein, appears to offer an environment where one can develop her/his professional skills and will be respected regardless of her/his origins, at least if s/he comes from the “West”. It has, thus, attracted numerous Greek students at least since the early 1960s, initially from the upper-middle class and, apparently, from the 1990s on, also from the lower-middle class. Driven by the notion of the UK as a hub for innovation, Greek professionals have also sought and often found a job in that country. London is home to

some shipowners of Greek origin. Greeks from other social backgrounds have been increasingly settling in the UK, especially in the context of the current crisis in Greece: This certainly applies to Greek professionals, especially in the fields of medicine, IT and higher education. Moreover, the UK has recently attracted unemployed Greeks from both working-class and middle-class origins, who have moved to the UK to work in businesses, such as restaurants.

Another cultural pro-British attitude in Greece addresses British popular culture and music in particular. The music of British bands, such as the Beatles, have enthused significant proportions of the Greek youth since the 1960s. Alongside US American bands, they have shaped diverse youth subcultures in Greece since the 1960s. This tendency continues up to the present day. Not everybody in Greece welcomed such a development, at least initially: various subjects, such as the Greek Orthodox Church and the Left, which would have preferred the Greek youth to opt for what they depicted as Greek cultural patterns, loathed it. Nevertheless, British and US American popular culture has been making inroads in the leisure pursuits of left-wingers already since the early 1970s and more so in the subsequent decades.

Nevertheless, positive attitudes towards the British society and culture have co-existed with negative ones in Greece. The latter perceptions are related to British tourists visiting Greece, especially young ones. Those tourists appear in Greek press to be rowdy. Moreover, a deeply entrenched sexist idea in Greece is that British women, like women from northern and central Europe in general, are invariably promiscuous. The perception that British women are *too* sexually permissive in comparison to Greek women is diffuse even at present in Greece among both men and women.

Overall, what had transpired between the late 1940s and the eve of the UK EU membership referendum with regard to Greek attitudes towards Britain did not follow a linear, but, rather, a meandering trajectory. This has been characterised by somewhat decreasing political anti-British attitudes, which have co-existed, however, by ambivalence towards what is viewed as British cultures and by outbreaks of skepticism towards the British foreign policy. In the meantime, opinion polls in 2016 also showed that political anti-Americanism had also been subsiding and quite dramatically in comparison to the previous years. What has gained momentum at the beginning the current debt crisis in Greece and in relation to the bailout agreements, in which the country has been involved, is an anti-German sentiment. The latter was particularly manifest in the context of the Greek bailout referendum on 5 July 2015. It was the point when the Greek government asked the electorate to accept or reject the bailout conditions proposed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. “No” prevailed with 61.31% of the vote. The anti-German sentiment has been multifarious throughout the debt crisis: it has ranged from loud critiques of the current German government to a metonymical approach that presents the Nazis as the quintessential

Germans. The latter representation transcends political boundaries. However, it is not uncontested: it has been causing rancorous debates within both the Left and the Right with several subjects rejecting it. Although it is still quite popular, it has been toned down since late 2015 in the rhetoric of some subjects, especially of members of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), the senior coalition partner in the Greek government since January 2015, who had endorsed this rhetoric at the beginning of the crisis.

It was against this background of this growing anti-German sentiment that the UK EU membership was discussed in Greece. As a result, what was debated, at least in the most popular Greek media, was not primarily internal developments in the UK that may have helped create a pro-Brexit majority in that country. Rather, Greek media focused on the ways in which EU and German policies may have estranged Britons from EU membership. For instance, *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, one of the most popular Greek newspapers, which hosts views from the centre-left to the radical Left, largely took an economic stance: various contributors, both those who welcomed and those who opposed Brexit, argued that the results should be attributed to the neoliberal, pro-austerity policies of the EU. Some of them added that these policies have been sponsored by Germany. Therefore, analyses of Brexit in this newspaper usually revolved around whether the EU may be reshaped and, if so, how. The right-wing press also focused on the EU and Germany and not in the UK, when reflecting on Brexit. For instance, articles in the ultra-conservative *Dimokratia*, whose website readership reaches approximately 700,000 unique users, maintained that Brexit may help build an alliance of sovereign nation-states in Europe in lieu of the “German-occupied” EU. By contrast, most articles in the liberal-conservative newspaper *Kathimerini*, whose online version attracts more than 1,650,000 unique users, has been against Brexit. The latter was, according to most articles in that newspaper, the outcome of the activity of “populists”, whom these articles contrasted to the “rational” “Brexiters”. However, once again, its analyses have largely focused on the relation between Brexit and EU policies and not on domestic developments in the UK. Overall, an inductive reasoning, aiming to draw conclusions on Germany’s and EU policies rather than delve into socio-political developments in the UK, marked the relevant debate in Greece.

The prevalence of such inductive reasoning, at least in the Greek press, does not mean that the hitherto representations of the UK among Greeks were not affected due to Brexit. A first change lies in the trope of the potential victimisation of the British nation. This trope has appeared in the rhetoric of some ultra-conservative subjects. It is indelibly linked to the aforementioned anti-German sentiment. For instance, in his sympathetic towards the Brexit account in *Dimokratia*, the ultra-right-wing politician Failos Kranidiotis maintained that the Britons fear the possibility of being “humiliated” by the Germans, as has happened, in his opinion, to the Greeks. Such a representation is in stark contrast with representations of the UK in Greece in the preceding decades: regardless of whether the Britons had been portrayed as a pillar of “Western” values or an “aggressor”, particularly in Cyprus, the British policymakers appeared to have been a key player in global politics. In their analyses of Brexit, those ultra-conservative voices sidelined any conflicts among the elites and the subordinated social groups in Britain,

portraying them all as imperilled by “Fritz”, namely the Germans. However, this victimisation trope, although a visible one, is far from being hegemonic in Greece, at least at the moment. Both right-wing and left-wing voices have challenged it. For instance, the Communist Party of Greece, which in the legislative election of September 2015 garnered 5.6% of the vote, argued that Brexit was favoured by a substantial segment of the British monopolies. Brexit, according to this party, serves as a means of facilitating the interests of these powerful monopolies in the global markets. Therefore, in this analysis of Brexit, the British elites are not a potential victim of the Germans, but an active agent pursuing its interests beyond the framework of the EU.

There is one more potential effect of Brexit on how some Greeks view the UK. This possible change is manifest among some, at least, people of Greek origin who currently study or work in the UK. Of course, as already mentioned, their social and political background varies. However, individuals of Greek origin from all walks of life seem to be in doubt about whether the UK will continue to be a global hub for innovation, which has so far been one of the main pro-British perceptions in Greece. They have voiced such concern in the Greek press in the aftermath of the UK EU membership referendum. As Brexit is an ongoing process, however, it remains to be seen whether Greeks will subscribe to a firm belief that the UK has become a hostile land for their education and their professional aspirations.

The UK EU membership referendum has also served as a means of self-reflection in Greece. Subjects across the political spectrum have viewed it in conjunction with the abovementioned Greek bailout referendum. What has triggered heated debates is whether the referendum is a useful tool for the electorate to express its will. Giorgos Katsambekis and George Souvlis illuminate this in their book chapter “EU referendum 2016 in the Greek Press”, which is part of the volume *Reporting the Road to Brexit* edited by A. Ridge-Newman et al. (2018). Newspapers, such as *Kathimerini*, argued that the “populists” could easily manipulate referenda across the EU. By contrast, *Dimokratia* and *Efimerida ton Syntakton* took a different stance: although they substantially differ in terms of political orientation, but both hosted interventions that portrayed the referendum in Greece, in the UK and in general as an important means for the majority to express its views and shape political decisions. In this vein, they welcomed the referendum also a tool that may help rectify what they regarded as the democratic deficit in the EU procedures. A circular set of connections is notable here: not only Greek ultra-conservative subjects, such as columnists in *Dimokratia*, addressed developments in the UK to challenge what they viewed as the anti-democratic attitude of the EU. Right-wing voices in Britain, which are committed to Brexit, have also drawn on the economic adjustment programme implemented in Greece to voice the same argument. A case in point is the [fiery speech](#) of Nigel Farage, then leader of the UKIP, in the European Parliament on 14/09/2011, where Farage accused the EU of “killing democracy” in Greece.

Overall, the UK EU membership referendum and its outcome, Brexit, has stirred extensive reflection in Greece. Such discussions have focused mostly on the EU policies and have largely been coloured with several shades of anti-Germanism. However, Brexit has also been a canvas, where key perceptions in Greece on politics and culture in the UK may be reconfigured. Such representations have followed a meandering path: They have orbited around a growing appreciation of some elements of cultural practices in the UK and a tolerance, if not support, towards close ties between Greece and the UK. Simultaneously, these tendencies have been moderated due to a lingering scepticism in Greece towards perceived gender and sexuality in Britain, but also because of outbreaks of critique of British foreign policy. This meandering path does not appear to have been radically altered in the aftermath of the UK EU referendum: its main characteristics persevere. However, what has appeared is the trope of “victimisation” of Britain and the growing doubt about whether the UK will continue to be open to EU professionals and students after Brexit. Simultaneously, the UK EU membership referendum has not been treated in isolation from the Greek bailout referendum that had preceded it. Debating around the former was also a mirror for reflection on how democracy in Greece and in the EU in general is best served. As an era is dawning, during which referenda in several EU member-countries have been happening or are demanded by influential political subjects, a transnational reflection on their conjunction may further spread. Its outcome also remains to be seen. It could foreground opposition to nationalism. Nevertheless, it may be marked, as David Motadel notes in his contribution to this roundtable discussion, by a reactionary cosmopolitanism.

Brief CV

Nikolaos Papadogiannis is a Lecturer in Modern History at Bangor University. He obtained his PhD in History in 2010 from the University of Cambridge. Before joining the staff at Bangor in January 2017, he worked as an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Humboldt University of Berlin and as a Teaching Fellow at the School of History of the University of St Andrews.

Nikolaos’ research focuses on Europe in the 1960s and 1970s from a transnational perspective. His research interests include protest cultures, travel, youth lifestyles, gender, sexuality and migration. His first monograph, published in 2015 by Berghahn Books, was entitled *Militant around the Clock? Left-wing youth politics, Leisure and Sexuality in post-dictatorship Greece, 1974-1981*. His articles have seen print in international journals, such as *Contemporary European History*, the *Journal of Contemporary History* and the *European History Quarterly*.